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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness and applicability of student discipline and attendance policies in Massachusetts' public schools are addressed in this report. Following an introduction, the second section presents a review of research and examines seven assumptions about current statewide discipline and attendance practices in light of recent findings. Recommendations are made in the third section, which advocates reexamining discipline, attendance, and academic punishment policies and implementing alternatives. Suggestions are offered for school practitioners in the following areas: staff development; discipline and attendance policies; governance and structure; curriculum and instruction; classroom management; student and family support; special needs students; and assessment and planning. The fourth section presents alternative practices that have been implemented by seven Massachusetts schools and one Connecticut school. Legal requirements for the Massachusetts' public school discipline and attendance policies are listed in the final section. (79 footnotes) (LMI)

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STRUCTURING SCHOOLS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS:

A FOCUS ON DISCIPLINE AND ATTENDANCE

Massachusetts Board of Education

EA 023318

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Frederick A. Wang., Needham

Commissioner Harold Raynolds, Jr., Secretary

Developed jointly by:
Division of School Programs
Elizabeth Twomey, Associate Commissioner

Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation
Barbara Brauner Berns, Director

Written by:
Dan French, Acting Director, Bureau of Student Development and Health
Linda Gerstle, Educational Specialist
Jeff Nellhaus, Educational Specialist

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For additional information or copies of this publication, call the Bureau of Student Development and Health at (617) 770-7580.

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From the Commissioner

A focus on discipline and attendance:

A school's discipline and attendance policies greatly influence a school's climate and the message students receive about their acceptance within the school. These policies set the tone for how students approach the teaching and learning process, as well as students' sense of the school as a supportive and caring community.

This report, **A Focus on Discipline and Attendance Policies**, is part of a series of reports on the need for systemic school change as a strategy to raise academic achievement and to provide successful school experiences for all of the Commonwealth's students. Previous topics have focused on ability grouping, grade retention, systemic school change, Teacher Support Teams, integration of students with special needs into regular education, and dropout prevention. The intent of each report is to provide an overview of the current research in the focus area, and suggest recommendations that schools can adopt.

The advisory report is a first step in beginning a dialogue by examining the current research on discipline and attendance and suggesting policies and practices that promote high attendance, reduce behavior problems, enhance school climates, and raise academic achievement. The advisory also summarizes recent statewide data on in-school and out-of-school suspension, truancy, and attendance rates. This data is described in greater detail in two companion documents entitled Suspensions in Massachusetts Public Schools, 1988-1989 and Attendance and Truancy Rates in Massachusetts Public Schools, 1988-1989 which can be obtained from the Department's Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation.

I know that this paper will be a useful tool in generating discussion on these important areas of schooling.

Harold Raynolds, Jr.
Commissioner

STRUCTURING SCHOOLS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS:

A FOCUS ON DISCIPLINE AND ATTENDANCE

March, 1991

Developed by:

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Discipline and Attendance Advisory Committee

Fred Andelman, Massachusetts Teachers Association
John Burton, Massachusetts Association of Administrators of Special Education
John P. Doherty, Jr., Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents
Francis F. Elliott, Massachusetts Association of School Committees
Marie Ferrari, Administrator for Chapter 188, Somerville Public Schools
David P. Hayes, Massachusetts Secondary School Administrators' Association
June Kuzmeskus, Lucretia Crocker Fellow, Pioneer Valley Regional School
Steven Leonard, Principal, Martin Luther King Middle School, Boston
Beverly Lydiard, Assistant Superintendent, Minuteman Vocational Technical School
Ed Mahoney, Massachusetts Middle Level School Adiminstrators Association
Stephen Spanger, Massachusetts School Counselors Association
Anne Wheelock, Massachusetts Advocacy Center

Massachusetts Department of Education

Paul Burnim, Educational Specialist, Western Mass. Service Delivery Center
Pam Chamberlain, Educational Specialist, Division of School Programs
Diane Curran, Esquire, Legal Office
John Desses, Educational Specialist, Eastern Mass. Service Delivery Center
Roselyn Frank, Program Director, Division of School Programs
Susan Freedman, Director, Office of Community Education
Shelly Gross, Educational Specialist, Division of Special Education
Marie Lindahl, Assistant Director, Division of Special Education
Georgia Parafestas, Educational Specialist, Central Mass. Service Delivery Center
Carole Thomson, Executive Director, Division of School Programs
Donna Wied, Educational Specialist, Western Mass. Service Delivery Center
Jack Wright, Educational Specialist, Western Mass. Service Delivery Center

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Why Discuss Discipline and Attendance?

A school's discipline and attendance policies and practices are an extension of an educational focus that prepares students to live in a participatory, democratic society.

A school's discipline and attendance policies and practices are an extension of an educational focus that prepares students to live in a participatory, democratic society. Sound discipline and attendance policies set reasonable and clear standards and high expectations for all students, with the goal of fostering self-discipline and personal investment in a positive school climate and community. School policies can promote a positive and inclusive school climate in which all students fulfill their learning potential.

Discipline and attendance policies also provide for the safe and orderly functioning of a school. These policies set limits upon what is expected and allowable behavior within the school community, while determining consequences for breaking the rules. In addition, these policies can also help students understand their behavior, solve problems, and develop positive strategies for managing daily life and for being a productive member of the school community.

Most administrators and teachers are committed to promoting positive discipline and attendance practices. Discipline and attendance problems are often cited by teachers as the main obstacle to providing effective instruction, and by administrators as the number one concern in the operation of their schools.[1] Orderly environments and high attendance rates directly affect the quality of a school's climate, the delivery of instruction, and the relationships among members of the school community.

Within this context, it is helpful for school staff to examine whether present discipline and attendance policies and practices achieve these goals. Is suspension an effective means to curb a school's discipline problems? Is in-school suspension a better alternative than out-of-school suspension? Does the practice of academic punishment benefit all students? Do school structures and policies contribute to discipline and truancy problems? What constitutes effective discipline and attendance practices? Do prevailing discipline practices appropriately address the unique issues of students with special needs?

1 Discipline

This paper addresses these questions by presenting a summary of the research on school discipline and attendance, and providing recommendations for successful discipline and attendance policies. This report is intended to encourage thoughtful dialogue within school districts related to the promotion of positive discipline and attendance practices that raise attendance rates, increase achievement, enhance school climates, and keep students in school through high school graduation. We hope that it will be a useful tool for superintendents, school committees, principals, teachers, counselors, parents, students, and community members as they plan to better meet the needs of all students.

A Review of the Research: What Does It Show?

Finding ways to encourage students to attend school regularly and providing a safe and orderly environment for learning have always presented challenges for educators. This section examines seven common assumptions about current discipline and attendance practices through reviewing the research in these areas.

ASSUMPTION ONE

Discipline and attendance problems are not widespread.

What the Research Shows

In a significant percentage of Massachusetts' schools, valuable learning opportunities are lost to poor attendance and high truancy and suspension rates.

Attendance, truancy, and suspension data give an indication of lost learning time. In Massachusetts, for example, there is a strong relationship between increased absenteeism and decreased test scores. As well, there is a strong correlation between suspension rates and the range and quantity of discipline problems within a school.[2]

... there is a strong correlation between suspension rates and the range and quantity of discipline problems within a school.

Suspensions and poor student attendance are cause for concern not only in many urban schools, but in other communities where adverse school and community factors place students at risk of academic failure. While less frequent within elementary schools, discipline and attendance problems rise dramatically in the middle and high school grades, particularly in grades seven and nine.

For example, while annual attendance rates exceeded 94% in more than half of the state's schools in 1988-1989, rates were below 90% in 199 schools (11%). Of these schools, 155 were located in urban school districts and 97 were high schools. The absenteeism rate in many of these schools exceeded 20%.

Annual truancy rates ranged from 10% to as high as 30% in 58 high schools. Although almost half of these schools were in urban centers, the rest were in economically developed suburbs and rural

economic centers. Hispanic students had the highest truancy rate at 10%, whereas the truancy rate for Asian students was less than 6%, for white students 7%, and for African-American students 8%.[3]

Out-of-school and in-school suspension rates were also high at both the middle and high school levels. Over 7% of the Commonwealth's middle school students were suspended either out-of-school or in-school, while nearly 11% of high school students were suspended out-of-school and 16% in-school. In 25% of the districts, one-quarter to three-quarters of high school students received some form of suspension. Comparable proportions of students were suspended in urban centers, small towns experiencing growth, and rural economic centers.[4]

ASSUMPTION TWO

Misbehavior and unexcused absences (truancy, tardiness, and class cutting) are closely correlated to student and family background characteristics.

What the Research Shows

Family background is not the primary determinant of behavior and truancy problems.

Research has found that how a school is organized and the type of learning environment that exists have significant influence over student behavior.

Research has found that how a school is organized and the type of learning environment that exists have significant influence over student behavior.[5] Seldom can disruptive behavior be attributed solely to a student's social and family background. No consistent relationship exists between the characteristics of students entering secondary schools and their subsequent behavior. Suspension, attendance, and truancy rates vary widely by school even when student backgrounds, verbal reasoning scores, and parental occupation are comparable.[6]

For example, an analysis of a major city found that annual suspensions varied from 1% to 43% in secondary schools, while attendance at these schools varied from 80% to 92% and the percent of students who were truant at least once during the school year from 26% to 43%. Generally, schools with low attendance had high suspension rates, and schools with high attendance had low suspension rates.[7]

Variations in the types of discipline and truancy problems also occur among classrooms in the same school. Classrooms vary in the total number of absences, the distribution of absences throughout the school year, and in repeat or multiple absences by the same student, even when controlled for student demographics.[8] Similarly, referrals for discipline vary by classroom and by teacher.[9]

ASSUMPTION THREE

Suspension is an effective strategy for improving students' behavior and attendance in school.

What the Research Shows

A. Misbehavior and absence are often student responses to a school climate that is not meeting their needs.

Absence and misbehavior may mask a student's underlying psychological, familial, and/or social problems. Misbehavior and truancy may often be expressions of a lack of social bonding, depression, increased mobility, changing structure of families, or other social-emotional issues.[10] When schools do not acknowledge and respond to these needs in a supportive way, a continuing cycle of misbehavior or absence can often ensue. Schools that rely upon disciplinary interventions and do not provide students with individual support and attention tend to have more discipline and truancy problems than other schools.[11] For example, in a study of the Montgomery County, Maryland Public Schools, 22% of suspended students were found to be in crisis while another 22% were "episodic" and had no prior history of truancy or misbehavior, suggesting the suspended students had underlying social and emotional problems that were not addressed.[12]

Schools that rely upon disciplinary interventions and do not provide students with individual support and attention tend to have more discipline and truancy problems than other schools.

On the other hand, schools that provide students with caring and supportive peer-peer and student-teacher relationships and that promote healthy adolescent social development experience fewer discipline and attendance problems and generally use alternatives to suspensions when dealing with students in crisis.[13] Mediation programs which emphasize conflict resolution have reduced fights, student-teacher conflicts and suspensions by upwards of 80%; have improved school climates; and have increased mediators' and

disputants' commitment to and participation in school activities.[14]

B. High absence and suspension rates have a direct correlation to low academic achievement and future decisions to drop out of school.

Misbehavior and truancy in school are closely correlated to low academic achievement, although not to cognitive ability. As well, in the High School and Beyond study, dropouts were more than three times as likely to have been suspended than were students who remained in school; likewise, 41% of dropouts reported having had disciplinary problems as opposed to only 16% of graduates. Behavior problems and poor grades were identified as the major determinants of why students drop out of school.[15]

One-half of all dropouts rate how school discipline was administered as poor or mediocre.[16] Dropouts perceive their suspensions to be a message of rejection from the school and are more likely than graduates to report that the teacher or principal "had it in for me" or that they had been pressured by administrators to leave the school.

High absenteeism is also strongly correlated to academic failure, feelings of school alienation, and future decisions to drop out of school. In one study, dropouts averaged 59 days absent prior to their leaving school, whereas comparable at-risk students who graduated averaged 18 days. Suspending at-risk students for truancy or class cutting often has the unintended effect of increasing rather than decreasing truancy as students perceive the suspension to be a lack of caring.[17]

C. There is no evidence that multiple suspensions have any benefit to the students who are suspended.

Misbehaving students are often suspended multiple times, both in-school and out-of-school. In a study of one city, approximately 40% of suspended students in grades 6-8 received mutliple suspensions.[18]

... there is no evidence that multiple suspensions change student behavior or have any beneficial impact on the affected student.

Yet, there is no evidence that multiple suspensions change student behavior or have any beneficial impact on the affected student. Students suspended repeatedly in the elementary grades are 12 times more likely to be suspended multiple times in the middle grades than students who have not been previously suspended.

Multiple suspendees participate less in extra-curricular activities, are more likely to be placed in special education programs, receive poorer course grades, and attend school less often than do one-time suspendees or students who have never been suspended.[19] More often than not, multiple suspensions indicate that the intervention is not working and may lead to increased misbehavior by the suspended student.

ASSUMPTION FOUR

Suspension and detention as responses to misbehavior and unexcused absence are the most appropriate strategies for maintaining classroom order and improving school climate.

What the Research Shows

A. Schools that focus on policies and practices that contribute to student success are the most effective in reducing discipline and attendance problems.

Many school factors contribute to student misbehavior and absence. Taking into account the myriad of school factors that contribute to misbehavior and truancy, several studies concluded that it is difficult to discern whether the low self-esteem, lack of self-control, and negative school attitudes common to suspended and truant students are brought to school or caused by the school. Studies point to the decrease in juvenile offense rates during weekends, summer months, after dropping out of school, and after graduation.[20]

Schools which seek to identify school factors that contribute to misbehavior and absence and replace them with more responsive policies and practices experience fewer discipline and attendance problems.

There are also many school factors which prevent discipline problems and encourage attendance. Schools which seek to identify school factors that contribute to misbehavior and absence and replace them with more responsive policies and practices experience fewer discipline and attendance problems.[21]

<u>1. School structures and policies.</u> The traditional secondary school structure is one cause of the highest percentage of discipline and attendance problems being found at the seventh and ninth grade levels. The transition to a larger, more impersonal, and highly departmentalized structure creates a mismatch with students' needs for a sense of community, opportunities for self-exploration, and occasions to develop positive relationships with adults.[22] This

problem is compounded by scheduling that results in 7 or 8 daily class changes, increasing the likelihood of discipline problems and cutting class.[23]

Ability grouping increases disruptive classroom behavior in low-ability-grouped classrooms. Low-tracked students misbehave more, have more negative feelings towards school, and are less committed to adhering to school rules than are high-tracked students.[24] Similarly, truant and suspended students are often retained in grade, a practice which increases truancy and dropout rates.[25]

On the other hand, clustering and staff teaming can reduce discipline problems and increase attendance. Clustering creates a sense of community and belonging, limits the geographic area within which students pass, and reduces the potential for interpersonal conflicts such as misidentification or stereotyping of students.[26] Similarly, the provision of mentor or teacher-advisor programs designed to develop positive student-adult relationships also improves discipline and attendance.[27] Scheduling longer blocks of learning time with fewer passing times can enhance achievement and reduce discipline problems in the halls.[28]

Heterogeneous grouping in well-structured classrooms that utilize cooperative learning and other interactive teaching strategies can reduce discipline problems while promoting cross-cultural friendships. Promotion with instructional support for low achievers also results in greater achievement and fewer discipline problems than does grade retention.[29]

Attendance can also improve significantly when contact is made with the families of truant students. For example, electronic home calling increased attendance by 3% in the San Francisco Public Schools, while one phone call by a guidance counselor to the homes of dropouts has been found to convince up to 25-30% of dropouts to return and regularly attend school.[30]

The delivery of instruction as well as how students are treated by the classroom teacher affect student motivation, self-discipline, and self-esteem.

2. Classroom instruction. Up to 80% of school disruptions are related to the manner in which classrooms operate. The delivery of instruction as well as how students are treated by the classroom teacher affect student motivation, self-discipline, and self-esteem.[31] When curriculum and instruction provide few opportunities for exploration, activity, or interaction, when students feel their work is not valued, and when personal issues are not addressed, students misbehave more and attend less.[32]

For example, teacher-centered instruction, in which large amounts of class time are spent by the teacher lecturing to students or by students working individually at their desks, constitutes approximately 70% of available time in the typical classroom.[33] These learning activities are often not appropriately matched to students' individual learning styles, can retard academic progress, and can increase classroom disruption and truancy as a result of a lack of student engagement. Thus, chronic truants and suspended students are often low achievers, and have experienced academic failure.[34]

There is also a well-established association between reading difficulties and classroom disruptive behavior. Undetected, reading difficulties often result in cumulative reading and language learning experiences that are unsuccessful and may lead to poor classroom behavior, low self-estimates of ability, psychosomatic complaints, and dislike of school.[35]

Other ineffective teaching practices - including lack of praise and feedback, absence of warmth, low time on task, short wait time on questions, excessive time spent on administrative tasks, and insufficiently structured lesson plans - are most often found in classrooms with high discipline problems.[36] In a study of 19 classes within one school, high absentee rates were found in classes which were highly competitive, high in teacher control, and low in teacher support, and that had stringent grading practices.[37] In another study, high school sophomores who got mostly A's had one-third fewer absences or incidents of tardiness per semester as those who got mostly D's. For absent and misbehaving students, a cycle is created in which they earn lower grades and show less than expected academic gains.[38]

... classrooms which are intellectually challenging, meaningful, and actively engage students in the learning process have better attendance and fewer discipline problems.

Conversely, classrooms which are intellectually challenging, meaningful, and actively engage students in the learning process have better attendance and fewer discipline problems. High teacher expectations, increased time on task, longer wait time on questions, and innovative instructional strategies such as cooperative, tactile, project, and experiential learning increase attendance and lower discipline problems.[39] Quality pre-school programs emphasizing a developmental approach and strong parental involvement decrease future discipline and attendance problems. In addition, teachers who integrate into the curriculum thematic material that represents students' cultural diversity also experience fewer discipline problems.[40]

3. Staff behavior and classroom management style. Misbehavior increases when students feel teachers do not care about them, when teachers believe students are not capable, when discipline is handled solely by rigid enforcement of rules rather than interpersonal interactions, when teachers do not deal with classroom discipline consistently, and when school staff exhibit racial biases.[41]

Teacher behavior that contributes to discipline problems includes use of judgmental vocabulary and demeaning labels, disrespect, discouragement of verbal interaction, orders, domination of verbal exchanges, questions for which no answer is expected, authoritarian classroom climates, whole-class punishment, threats or rejection, and overuse of negative feedback.[42]

On the other hand, students who feel supported by the teacher and are given clear expectations attend more and misbehave less. For example, discipline and attendance improves in classrooms in which teachers employ frequent praise and feedback, and well thought out lesson plans. Classrooms experience fewer discipline problems when students are treated with respect, requests are more the norm than directives, students have the opportunity to present their views and opinions, and the physical environment in the classroom is pleasing.[43]

The manner in which rules are developed, the rules themselves, and the process by which students are disciplined are often more reliable predictors of a school's suspension rate than the offense committed or the demographic profiles of students.

4. Student involvement. School disruption is correlated to student perceptions of the fairness and clarity of school rules, as well as the amount of student input into the making of school rules. The manner in which rules are developed, the rules themselves, and the process by which students are disciplined are often more reliable predictors of a school's suspension rate than the offense committed or the demographic profiles of students.[44] Schools with high suspension rates tend to view discipline punitively and often exacerbate discipline problems by not involving students who are misbehaving in the decision-making process of dealing with their behavior. Such responses can result in a lowered sense of responsibility by students for their actions.[45]

Discipline improves in schools in which students have meaningful decision-making opportunities, and in which discipline is viewed as part of the learning process. Students are often able to offer creative and long-term solutions to their misbehavior.[46]

B. African-American, Hispanic, and low-income students are suspended at disproportionately greater rates than are other students, raising questions of whether suspension is a discriminatory practice.

In the Commonwealth, the K-12 out-of-school suspension rates for African-American and Hispanic students are almost twice as high as the suspension rates for White students. The middle grades are of particular concern, as grades 6-8 African-American and Hispanic students are suspended out-of-school at three times the rate, and are suspended in-school at twice the rate, of White students.[47] Low-income students are also suspended disproportionately, regardless of race. In one study, while 31% of surveyed students were on AFDC, they accounted for 46% of all suspensions.[48] For these students, disproportionate suspension rates can create heightened perceptions of discrimination and a resultant sense of futility about continuing school.[49]

C. Providing educational experiences that better meet the needs of all students may be the most effective strategy in improving the discipline of students with special needs.

... misbehavior by students with special needs can often be attributed to teacher-centered instruction, curriculum that does not reflect the diversity of students' needs, ability grouping, and grade retention.

Similar to regular education students, misbehavior by students with special needs can often be attributed to teacher-centered instruction, curriculum that does not reflect the diversity of students' needs, ability grouping, and grade retention.[50] In Massachusetts, students receiving special education services out of the regular education classroom for more than 25% of the time (i.e., 502.3, 502.4, 502.4i) are 1.5 to 5 times more likely to be suspended out-of-school than in-school, while the reverse is true for regular education students. In fact, the percentage of students suspended out-of-school increases as the amount of special needs services increase.[51]

These data raise many questions: Do the disproportionate suspension patterns contribute to the disproportionate dropout rates for students with special needs? Are staff development opportunities, behavior intervention strategies, and educational programs appropriate to meet these students' special needs? Do substantially separate settings for students with special needs increase rather than decrease discipline problems?[52]

Students with special needs exhibit fewer behavior problems when they are involved in curriculum at the appropriate skill level,

... some educators point to the need for fundamental restructuring of regular education - of the curriculum, instructional strategies, student support, staff development, and the school climate - as the most compelling solution to the dilemma of disciplining students with special needs.

actively engaged in learning, and have opportunities to experience a high level of success. As a result of these issues, some educators point to the need for fundamental restructuring of regular education - of the curriculum, instructional strategies, student support, staff development, and the school climate - and the integration of students with special needs into regular education classrooms as the most compelling solutions to the dilemma of disciplining students with special needs.[53]

ASSUMPTION FIVE

Suspensions are generally used only as a last resort, and only for the most serious offenses.

What the Research Shows

The majority of suspensions are for offenses that may not warrant such a serious consequence as suspension.

Frequently, the most common school response to absence is punishment.[54] For example, in a 1988 review of Massachusetts attendance policies, 12% of districts assigned out-of-school suspension for the first or second truancy, 32% in-school suspension, and 6% grade or credit reduction.[55] In these cases, a school's first response to a student, who by his/her actions is expressing feelings of disengagement and alienation, is to punish and/or remove the student from school or classrooms for a longer period of time.

In-depth data collected from a sample of Massachusetts districts reveal similar patterns. For example, in one urban district an analysis of high school suspensions for the 1988-1989 school year revealed that only 7% of suspensions were for serious offenses (drugs and alcohol, fighting and assault, weapons, vandalism and destruction of property), while 32% were suspended for cutting class, 2% for truancy, and 59% for violation of other school rules (insubordination, classroom disruption, disrespect).[56] This mirrors national data which finds that upwards of 90% of suspensions are for attendance violations and friction offenses (disrespect, insubordination), actions in which neither people nor property are physically harmed.[57]

This data reveals that significant numbers of students are suspended for "violation of school rules," of which there are no clear definitions (e.g., insubordination, disrespect, disruption). These incidents are often dependent upon the subjective interpretation of the interaction between the teacher or administrator and the student.[59] Few schools have procedures in place to resolve these conflicts constructively. In a 1988 survey of Massachusetts' school districts, only 18% mentioned mediation as an alternative disciplinary procedure.[60]

This trend seems to occur across all student groups. For example, students with special needs are more often suspended for disruptive behavior, behavior code violations, tardiness, class cutting, and disrespect than they are for fighting and other serious offenses.[58]

Significant numbers of students are suspended for "violation of school rules," of which there are no clear definitions .

This suggests that school responses to misbehavior and nonattendance are often punitive, rather than corrective or therapeutic. In addition, consequences for repeated offenses for minor problems such as truancy or classroom misbehavior seem to be similar to those received for major offenses such as possession of weapons or drugs, although the length of the suspension may vary by offense.

ASSUMPTION SIX

In-school suspension and counseling interventions are effective strategies to reduce misbehavior and truancy.

What the Research Shows

In-school suspension, counseling, and tutoring programs that focus solely upon correcting student problems are not as effective in reducing misbehavior and truancy as are broader school improvement initiatives.

Evidence exists that in-school suspension programs and counseling interventions, if properly administered, may reduce discipline problems. Intensive counseling, especially group counseling, can improve a student's self-concept and sense of control, and reduce the likelihood of a student receiving in-school suspension in the future.[61] In-school suspension programs have been found to reduce out-of-school suspensions and disciplinary referrals.[62]

Schools should not assume, however, that all alternative, in-school disciplinary practices serve students better or are an improvement over out-of-school suspension. In-school suspension and counseling programs are often used as a strategy to control and maintain authority or to regulate student behavior, rather than helping students identify and solve the problem that has caused the student's misbehavior.[63]

Intervention programs for students who misbehave or are truant, and that treat students as the sole source of difficulty are often ineffective.

Intervention programs that treat students as the sole source of difficulty (most often found in in-school suspension, case management, behavior modification, and counseling programs) are often ineffective.[64] A study of an in-school suspension program found only a 50% graduation rate for students assigned to the program, bringing into question the long-term benefit or impact of this practice. In-school suspension programs may result in an increase of a school's overall suspension rate, as students may be suspended in-school for less serious offenses than they would be if they were suspended out-of-school.[65]

In a national review of counseling and case management programs, nine projects using a case management approach had neutral or negative results, and 29 of 38 projects using individual or group counseling had neutral or negative results in long-term improvement of behavior.[66] Projects in which truant students are enrolled in special classes, or in which school-based mental health teams provide attendance monitoring, health services, and community agency referrals have also resulted in little or no long-term gains in student attendance or achievement. Projects which place chronic truants and misbehaving students in separate programs often result in increased misbehavior and truancy because of negative peer influence and lack of positive peer role models.[67]

Perhaps the best documented example of the failure of intervention approaches for at-risk students is New York City's Attendance Intervention-Dropout Prevention Program. Over the course of four school years, the district spent $120 million, or $8,000 per student (above the annual per-pupil cost), to provide 15,000 truant and at-risk junior high and high school students with counseling services, increased home-school contact, work-study and job training programs, and referrals to community agencies. Despite these resources, only 40% of participating students improved their attendance, less than 45% increased the number of courses they passed, only 25-30% were promoted in grade each year, and more

than 50% had dropped out of school by the third year of the program. Participants experienced the same average declines in attendance over the four years whether they were in the program for one year or three. The report concluded that programs which focus solely upon intervention services targeted to "fix" what was wrong with the student do not work, and that more systemic school improvements were needed.[68]

On the other hand, programs that have implemented school-wide improvement efforts have been consistently successful in reducing discipline and attendance problems. In a study of seven schools in Charleston, South Carolina, schools created shared decision-making governance teams; reviewed and revised curriculum and discipline policies; conducted staff development on effective instruction; created study skills, reading, peer counseling, and career education programs; increased the number of field trips; and began a School Pride Campaign. Program schools were found to improve on 90% of school disruption measures, while comparison schools improved on only 28% of these measures. Organizational change was found to be more effective than direct service intervention.[69]

... school-wide change efforts, which include clustering and flexible modular scheduling, have been found to significantly reduce detentions, fighting, and suspensions while increasing attendance, grade averages, and college attendance.

Similar school-wide change efforts, which include clustering and flexible modular scheduling, have been found to significantly reduce detentions, fighting, and suspensions while increasing attendance, grade averages, and college attendance. Case management approaches which combine revision of school policies and practices that contribute to discipline and attendance problems have been effective in decreasing behavior problems and increasing attendance.[70]

ASSUMPTION SEVEN

Academic punishment is an effective strategy to raise a school's attendance rate.

What the Research Shows

While academic punishment may be successful in raising a school's overall attendance rate, it is often accomplished at the expense of certain subgroups of students.

Academic punishment is the practice of failing a student or reducing a student's grade solely due to absence. At least 60% of

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the Commonwealth's middle and high schools employ some form of academic punishment. Proponents argue that the policy is successful in raising average daily attendance.[71]

Yet, examining overall average attendance rates to determine a policy's effectiveness ignores specific subgroups of students and may contribute to higher course failure, truancy, and dropout rates for truant at-risk students.[72] Academic punishment policies may exacerbate low academic achievement of truant students, despite a student's increased attendance at school. For example, in a school that requires 85% attendance to receive course credit, a student who improves his/her attendance from 30% to 75% from one year to the next would still face a year of no credit, bringing into question the arbitrariness of the practice.

Academic punishment policies may exacerbate low academic achievement of truant students and may contribute to the decline in attendance for at-risk students over the course of a school year.

Academic punishment may contribute to a decline in attendance for at-risk students over the course of a school year. For example, a study of an urban district that employed academic punishment found that while 85% of middle school students met the attendance requirement for the first quarter, only 73% did so in the fourth quarter. As students failed their courses for the school year, the incentive to attend school decreased. By the end of the school year, the number of truant students had increased so that 19% of middle school students were truant more than 20% of the time. The study found that overall attendance can rise at the same time that the percent of students absent 15% or more of the time also rises.[73]

Particular aspects of academic punishment policies exacerbate its negative impact upon certain students. For example, 35% of Massachusetts' districts that employ academic punishment use the entire school year, rather than academic quarters or semesters, as the time span for setting attendance limits. In these cases, if a student exceeds the absence limit, even if it is early in the school year, he/she loses an entire year's worth of credit thereby reducing any incentive to attend school for the remainder of the school year. In other cases, students are penalized for excused as well as unexcused absences, or students are penalized for absences due to handicapping conditions.[74]

Other approaches to raising average attendance rates - that stress reward, support services, and curriculum improvements - have been found to experience attendance gains that are equal to or better than districts employing academic punishment policies, without adverse effects to subgroups of at-risk students.[75]

Conclusion

Schools are faced with the enormous task of providing a safe and orderly environment for learning, helping students grapple with the many issues that they face in today's world, developing a caring and nurturing school community, and preparing students to be responsible citizens in a democratic society. Developing sound discipline and attendance policies that reflect these values is one step towards accomplishing these goals.

Research confirms that the majority of suspended students are punished for infractions that do not dramatically interfere with the operations of the school or endanger anyone in it. Unfortunately, as with most school practices that sort students (ability grouping and grade retention being two others), suspension and academic punishment disproportionately affect African-American, Hispanic, and low-income students. The consequences of such punishments are significant. Suspension is closely correlated to grade retention, low academic achievement, negative school attitudes, and ultimately, dropping out of school. Other interventions, such as counseling programs, are often relatively ineffective in improving the long-term behavior, attendance, or achievement of these students.

Suspension is closely correlated to grade retention, low academic achievement, negative school attitudes, and ultimately, dropping out of school.

Many school-related factors contribute to discipline and attendance problems, such as school organization, unchallenging and irrelevant curriculum, traditional approaches to instruction, lack of personal adult support, and insensitivity to cultural differences. Schools cannot adequately address discipline and attendance problems without also examining these contributing factors and undertaking systemic changes in all areas of schooling. To fail to question the impact of these practices upon students who have behavior and attendance problems is to fail to meet the mission of schools of educating all students to their fullest potential.[76]

Schools need to create learning environments which promote learning and positive attitudes toward schooling. Systemic changes are often necessary to improve school climate and develop innovative curricular and instructional practices that meet the diverse needs of all students.

Schools with few discipline and attendance problems adopt a preventive approach to discipline and attendance, emphasizing respect, individual and group responsibility, commitment to community, and alternative forms of conflict resolution. These schools engage all students in meaningful, active learning that challenges them to think, understand, and problem-solve.

What Schools Can Do: Recommendations for Discipline and Attendance

Based upon the research summarized in this report, the Massachusetts Department of Education recommends that schools reexamine discipline, attendance, and academic punishment policies and implement alternatives. Changing traditional approaches to discipline and attendance is not an easy task. The following recommendations are made to assist in implementing practices that encourage all students to succeed.

Because of the findings that correlate discipline and attendance problems to school-related factors, recommendations around school restructuring are integrated into this section. Many of the recommendations require no additional funds or are low-cost; others may require additional funds. It is suggested that a representative committee examine the list of recommendations to see which are most appropriate to a particular school or district, and build them into a long-range plan of improvement.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Staff development should respond to identified problems and be integrated into a long-range plan of improvement.

1) **Conduct staff development** in the areas of discipline and attendance. Staff development should respond to identified problems and be integrated into a long-range plan of improvement. Consider staff development series in the following areas:

- Teacher expectations;
- Preventive discipline, including the relation between effective instruction and classroom management;
- Learning styles, active learning pedagogy, and working with diverse learners;
- The teacher's role in supporting students' social and emotional growth and development; and
- Management of learning disabilities and behavior problems within the regular education classroom.

For each of these areas, staff development needs to be an on-going process that takes place over a period of time. Plan peer

observation, coaching, and follow-up consultation in the classroom to assist teachers to implement ideas generated within the training.

2) **Identify patterns of disciplinary referrals and truancy**. Offer teachers from these classrooms various forms of support, including access to mediation programs, peer teacher modeling and coaching, observations in other classrooms, and increased supervision. Assist teachers to set concrete goals and define strategies to decrease classroom discipline problems, increase attendance, and experiment with teaching and learning approaches which more effectively engage their students.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DISCIPLINE AND ATTENDANCE POLICIES

1) **Establish principles of successful discipline and attendance policies** that focus upon self-discipline and that are preventive and corrective rather than solely punitive.

2) **Use in-school and out-of-school suspensions only for behavior that endangers the school, staff, or students** - such as violence, possession of weapons, or use or sale of drugs and alcohol. As a general practice, no student should be suspended, in-school or out-of-school, for more than three days for a specific rules infraction unless the suspended student presents a long-term threat to the safety of others. With the recognition that suspension alone rarely helps resolve the problem that caused the behavior, suspensions should be accompanied with counseling, family intervention, and/or mediation. Allow suspended students ample opportunity to make up missed schoolwork and tests and receive full credit for work completed.

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3) **Include the following components in all in-school suspension programs**:

- Employment of conflict resolution strategies that encourage self-reflection, communication, and identification of contributing school policies that may have influenced the student's behavior;
- Development of individual contracts for performance, behavior, conflict resolution, and additional services to be received;
- Provision of educational enrichment, as well as an opportunity to make up school work;
- Requests for parental involvement;

- Provision of individual, group, and/or peer counseling;
- Operation of the program in a defined space that is conducive to learning; and
- Staffing by qualified personnel.

4) **Establish a policy by which any student who is suspended three times within a given year undergoes a formal review** of his/her program to determine strategies or program changes that better meets the student's needs.

5) **Establish a policy by which students who have been previously suspended can contract to have the suspension removed from their temporary record**, except in extreme cases, if they achieve a defined length of time of good behavior and attendance and passing grades.

6) **Do not punish students for the inactions or actions of his/her parents or peers** (for example, suspending a student until his/her parents attend a conference).

7) **Consider transferring students who commit the most serious offenses** (e.g., sale of drugs, possession of a loaded weapon) to an alternative setting that can provide more intensive services. These placements should be seen as temporary, however, with the eventual goal of transitioning these students back into the mainstream program.

8) **Change the nature of detention programs so that students do not merely sit for a defined length of time.** Instead, employ disciplinary consequences that have meaning and relevance to the behavior. For example, school-site custodial work and counseling are more appropriate consequences for grafitti and vandalism than is suspension; after- and before-school homework and tutoring centers may be appropriate for students who are not completing academic work; and a specified number of hours of counseling at a community agency may be appropriate for students who misbehave in class.

... employ disciplinary consequences that have meaning and relevance to the behavior.

9) **Eliminate academic punishment policies**, or the failing of a student or lowering of a student's grades due to attendance-related reasons. Instead, base course grades on a predefined and publicized percentage formula of classroom participation and behavior, academic work, homework, and test results.

For schools that continue to employ academic punishment policies, institute buy-back attendance policies for students who have exceeded the allowable number of days absent (these policies allow students to reduce the number of days absent by attaining predetermined criteria such as community service, attending instructional enrichment classes, and/or attending school a defined number of consecutive days). Ensure that excused absences and in-school and out-of-school suspensions are not counted in the number of allowable days absent. Establish an automatic appeals process for students who do exceed the allowable absence limit.

10) **Allow all tardy students to register their attendance** on the day they are tardy. Do not, for example, refuse entry to tardy students because they do not have a parent's note.

11) **Eliminate the practice of widespread grade retention** and base promotion and graduation upon continuous progress towards mastery of a defined set of concepts, skills, and outcomes. Establish flexible standards of competence in the primary grades, recognizing that children learn through varying mediums and at varying rates.

Implement a comprehensive mediation program that provides an alternative to traditional approaches to discipline.

12) **Implement a comprehensive mediation program** that provides an alternative to traditional approaches to discipline. To accomplish this, employ the following steps:

- Train a representative group of students and teachers to be mediators. Ensure that student mediators include a cross section of students, including those with discipline and attendance problems;
- Provide orientation to the entire school population on mediation and conflict resolution;
- Provide staff development on mediation, conflict resolution, and the use of mediation as an alternative to traditional disciplinary measures;
- Integrate conflict resolution units into specific courses taken by all students;
- Offer mediation as the first option before traditional disciplinary measures are used. Include staff-student conflicts in the referral process. Ensure the decision to enter mediation is voluntary; and

· Ensure that all decisions reached through mediation are mutual, in writing, confidential, kept on record, and respected by school officials.

13) **Create a system of identifying students** who are chronic truants for services. Criteria might include 5 or more consecutive days of absence, shorter and more frequent absences, or systematic patterns of absence (i.e., absence on a particular day of the week). Refer these students to a case management system for providing services to at-risk students.

14) **Clearly define and consistently enforce student handbook and classroom rules.** Describe students' rights and responsibilities in the handbook.

15) **Regularly and publicly recognize students** who make measureable gains in attendance and behavior. Introduce programs to "catch students being good."

16) **Develop two-way contracts** between students with discipline and/or attendance problems and parents, administrator, and teachers. Define the length of time it will be effective, delineate standards of performance for the student, and describe services to be provided and/or changes to be made by the school.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL GOVERNANCE AND STRUCTURE

1) **Emphasize the role of the principal as an instructional leader** and the person who has a great deal of influence in creating a school climate of respect, treating others with dignity, and providing support to those who need it.

Emphasize the role of the principal as an instructional leader and the person who has a great deal of influence in creating a school climate of respect, treating others with dignity, and providing support to those who need it.

2) **Create a shared decision-making model of school governance** which includes parent, teacher, administrator, community, and student representation, and that makes decisions and recommendations over a wide range of school areas including hiring, budgeting, resource allocation, curriculum, programming, and policy development. Grant the school's Student Council a similar formal channel of input into these issues. Such bodies can improve a school's climate and increase the ownership of and responsibility for school rules for all constituencies; and/or

Institute a community meeting within the school that provides for broad participation from all school constituencies - including faculty, students, administrators, guidance, and support staff - in discussion of school climate and other school issues. Ensure that community meetings occur regularly and that they are for all students and staff within a small program, or for representatives from a larger program or school. Discuss school-wide issues and bring these issues back to each constituency group to vote upon prior to large-group decisions being made.

3) **Create a Quality of School Life Circle** in which teachers, students, and parents meet regularly in a discussion group on the quality of school life. This forum can be both a support group and an ideas-generating group. Ideas on improving the quality of school life can be referred to the governance body of the school for consideration. Such forums have been found to both improve school climate and reduce teacher time spent on discipline.[77]

4) **Involve secondary students** on curriculum development committees and provide for student reviews of courses.

5) **Structure the school around cross-discipline teacher teams** that work with designated clusters of students over a period of more than one year. In particular, consider this structure for grades 6-12. Clustering and staff teaming increase the amount of personal adult contact with students, while allowing the team to develop a consistent set of guidelines and rules for academic work, discipline, and attendance. Provide these teams with daily common planning time to develop an interdisciplinary curricular approach. Give these teams control over scheduling and encourage them to design learning blocks of time that allow for a real-world, problem-solving approach to instruction.

Clustering and staff teaming increase the amount of personal adult contact with students, while allowing the team to develop a consistent set of guidelines and rules for academic work, discipline, and attendance.

6) **Schedule the school day at the secondary level to consist of longer learning blocks** for fewer courses. While creating more optimal conditions for learning, it also reduces the number of passing times during the school day in which discipline problems may occur.

7) **Group students heterogeneously**, and employ small-group learning situations frequently. Reassess and reconfigure within-class groups periodically to provide students with opportunities to work with a diverse range of students. Form groups according to interests or learning style rather than perceived ability.

8) **Ensure that exposure to, and sensitivity and respect for, all students' culture and language are integrated** into school routines and the curriculum.

9) **Implement an orientation program** for students in transition grades or programs (i.e., first year of junior high, middle, or high school; moving from a bilingual or special education program to the regular education program) to review school rules and student responsibilities. Consider "buddy" systems for those students who may need additional support, pairing older students with younger students.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

1) **Employ instructional strategies that emphasize higher order thinking skills** and encourage self-discipline of the learner. In particular, learning how to think and understand is an important skill for students with behavior and attendance problems. Provide students with problem-solving activities that have optimal challenge and manageable conflict so that students can experience competence and success.

Provide students with problem-solving activities that have optimal challenge and manageable conflict so that students can experience competence and success.

2) **Increase the use of active-learning pedagogy and student-to-student instructional strategies** while employing less whole-group instruction and individual seat work. Build in incentives for group interaction, while establishing cooperative group work as an important value. In particular, increase the use of cooperative learning, cross-age learning opportunities, applied academics, and competency-based instruction.

3) **Transition to an interdisciplinary approach to the curriculum** that is concept-based and thematic, reflecting the diversity of students' cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.

4) **Promote increased responsibility in the classroom** through student learning teams, project-based learning, peer teaching, and students maintaining their own records and files of completed work.

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5) **Utilize community service and internship programs** to build self-discipline and responsibility and increase the relevancy of what is being learned in the classroom.

6) **Assess students' academic progress frequently**, using multiple measures that include student self and group assessments. Increase the use of nonevaluative feedback to students that gives them a clear sense of their progress in school. Do not grade all work, allowing significant portions of classwork to be works-in-progress that are worked on by student learning teams. Decrease the use of competitive grading and standardized tests to evaluate students, and decrease reliance upon multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, and true-false tests. Increase the use of exhibitions, performance assessment, portfolios, and other displays of student learning. Allow students occasionally to pick their own due date for completion of work.

7) **Provide opportunities for the acquisition of social and study skills** through enrichment courses or integrating these skills into the regular curriculum.

8) **Emphasize the role of citizens in a democratic society into the social studies curriculum**, as well as the role of students in a school community. Discuss such themes as law, governance, diversity, respect, involvement, and individual and group rights and responsibilities.

9) **Require developmentally appropriate instruction in reading and writing** to be a priority for all grades and all disciplines with the goal of making every student a writer and a reader. Set semester goals for the numbers of writing samples to be written and books to be read by each student within each subject area.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Decide upon classroom rules, grading policies, and instructional focus with students.

1) **Decide upon classroom rules, grading policies, and instructional focus with students**. Develop classroom rules at the beginning of each school year that are consistent with the guidelines of the school's handbook and are permanently posted for all to see.

2) **Encourage the following techniques**:

- Be specific and clear in directions;
- Set clear expectations for behavior and performance, avoid threats, and be consistent in limit-setting. Maintain the same high expectations for all students;
- Give frequent positive feedback for gains in all areas of achievement and behavior, and recognize a broad range of demonstrable competencies;
- Engage students who are misbehaving in problem-solving activities, avoid win-lose situations, and offer choices;
- Avoid labelling students, or using authoritarian tones and language;
- Treat students with respect and dignity;
- Have regular times to evaluate the classroom environment and curriculum;
- Use "I" messages to discuss problem behavior by stating how the behavior makes the teacher feel;
- Allow students ample opportunity for both challenge and success;
- Promote a group identity by engaging in cooperative experiences;
- Avoid long periods of delay beginning classes, between activities, and in ending classes, keeping administrative duties during classtime to a minimum; and
- Teach students interpersonal skills, such as conversing, listening, helping, and sharing.

Give frequent positive feedback for gains in all areas of achievement and behavior, and recognize a broad range of demonstrable competencies.

3) **Create classrooms that are well-decorated and pleasing** that include pictures of role models depicting the nation's diversity.

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STUDENT AND FAMILY SUPPORT

1) **Create a peer tutoring program**, and engage a range of older students, including those who have discipline and attendance problems, in working with younger students.

2) **Provide multiple opportunities for parent involvement** in the school, including attending seminars on child development, representation on school governance structures, and assisting in the classroom.

3) **Create home-school partnerships** with the families of those students who are truant or having discipline problems. Call daily those students who are absent without an excuse from school. Conduct home visits to establish a relationship with family members. Involve families of truant students in problem-solving, either through formal treatment strategies or through family systems meetings that include key school and family members. Develop contracts between the home and school to promote better attendance and behavior.

Involve families of truant students in problem-solving, either through formal treatment strategies or through family systems meetings that include key school and family members.

4) **Recruit teachers or business and community representatives to be mentors** to low attenders or students who consistently misbehave. Ensure that the staffperson is responsible for mentoring, counseling, conducting occasional home visits, networking with other teachers, and regularly communicating with the home.

5) **Create advisor-advisee programs** to provide students with increased peer and adult support, while also giving them a forum in which to discuss issues of concern to them. Include all students in these programs and group them heterogeneously.

6) **Develop a partnership with community agencies** to conduct an after-school homework and activities center that supports students' attendance and achievement in school. Such a center in Boston successfully increased students' attendance and achievement.[78]

7) **Form a Student or Teacher Support Team** - composed of an adjustment counselor, guidance counselor, teacher, administrator, special education teacher, community agency representative,

psychologist, and nurse - to provide case management services and recommend policy changes to improve discipline and attendance. Refer students who are consistently truant or have behavior problems to this team. Require the team to decide upon a plan of services that will support the student's success in school. Assign one of the team members to monitor referred students to ensure that the prescribed services are meeting their needs. Review patterns of referrals to determine if there are any school factors contributing to discipline and attendance problems. Provide recommended policy changes to the school's governing body.

8) **Provide group counseling** to chronic truants and misbehavers. Invite the principal to meet regularly with them to discuss school issues that may be contributing factors to students' problems.

9) **Strengthen the capacity to provide school-site counseling** and prevention services, including crisis intervention, short-term counseling, and teacher consultation. Rethink the role of school support personnel to include one of facilitating case management services.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DISCIPLINING STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

1) **Employ strategies to increase the chances that special needs students will succeed in regular education**, including the following:

- Identify settings in regular education that can successfully accommodate students with special needs;
- Design better placement criteria to ensure successful integration;
- Develop integrated opportunities for students with special needs to acquire academic and nonacademic skills required for regular classroom success;
- Integrate resource room teachers and counselors into the regular education classroom, utilizing them as behavior managers, crisis intervenors, and consultants to regular education teachers; and
- Conduct staff development opportunities on integration.

Integrate resource room teachers and counselors into the regular education classroom, utilizing them as behavior managers, crisis intervenors, and consultants to regular education teachers

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2) **Schedule regular meetings between teachers and therapists** to share problems and solutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ASSESSMENT AND PLANNING

1) **Convene a task force** of interested members of the school community to assess current discipline and attendance practices and develop recommendations, or alternatively, assign this as a project to a particular classroom of students. If a task force, include student, teacher, parent, community, and administrative membership that represents the diverse constituencies of your school community. (For high schools, this task may be given to the school's Handbook Review Committee, while all schools may use the School Improvement Council.) Conduct several types of inquiry:

Analyze suspension, attendance, and truancy data by socioeconomic status, special needs, race, gender, grade level, school building, and classroom.

a. Analyze suspension, attendance, and truancy data by socioeconomic status, special needs, race, gender, grade level, school building, and classroom. Further analyze suspension data by multiple suspensions and reasons for suspension. Include in-school, out-of-school, and total suspensions in the analysis. Develop profiles at the district, school, and grade levels;

b. Conduct a school climate survey of students, teachers, and parents around discipline and attendance issues (samples are available from the Massachusetts Department of Education's Bureau of Student Development and Health); and

c. Interview suspended and chronic truants on their attitudes towards school and factors that contribute to their behavior.

Analyze the data and use it to answer the following questions:

- What is the extent of our discipline and attendance problems?
- What is the profile of students who are suspended? Truant? Are there any groups disproportionately represented?
- Are there disproportionate suspension or truancy rates in specific school buildings? Grade levels? Classrooms?

- Are there common characteristics of classroom management and instruction in classrooms that have discipline and attendance problems? What is the grouping pattern in these classes?

- What school factors may contribute to high truancy and discipline problems?

- How is the use of suspensions monitored and evaluated?

2) **Distribute the results of your assessment** and encourage public discussion.

3) **Visit other schools and districts** that have successfully implemented school-wide approaches which have led to improved discipline and attendance.

4) **Develop and implement a school-wide plan**, using a participatory process, for improving discipline and attendance.

Promising Discipline and Attendance Practices

Reducing discipline problems and raising attendance rates often requires a multi-faceted, systemic approach to school improvement under which a variety of strategies are employed. Below are a few examples of schools that have had historically high suspension and truancy rates and that have undertaken systemic changes to address these issues. Some of these schools are still in the beginning stages of change; however, an initial assessment indicates significant rate decreases and improved school climates.

Child Study Center
Yale University
New Haven, CT

· James Comer, a professor and director of Yale University's Child Study Center, has worked for the past twenty years with the elementary and middle schools in New Haven to raise achievement levels of minority students. An underlying assumption in his work is that promoting all aspects of a student's development - social, emotional, linguistic, cognitive, and physical - will encourage bonding to school and result in increased achievement. His approach includes: the need for a strong understanding of child development theory; the formation of school governance and mental health teams; the creation of a school improvement plan; and multiple opportunities for parent involvement. This approach has resulted in dramatic gains in attendance and reading and math achievement, and decreases in suspensions in participating schools.

Dr. James Comer, Director
Child Study Center
Yale University
New Haven, CT
(203) 785-2548

Eastern Junior High School
Lynn, MA

· Eastern Junior High School has developed a school philosophy and organizational plan which better suits the educational and developmental needs of the early adolescent than the traditional junior high school model. The school has undergone a total restructuring, including clustering the entire school and assigning staff teams to each cluster. These teams have daily common planning time to develop interdisciplinary curriculum, monitor student progress, and plan cluster activities. Other key components of this restructuring effort include: staff development in advisor-advisee programs, cooperative learning, and early adolescent issues; early college and career awareness activities; active business

and higher education partnerships; a case manager to track attendance and conduct home visits; and the PACE Project (Partnership of Agencies for Counseling and Education), a collaborative of human service agencies which meets monthly at the school to coordinate the delivery of services to students and their families. As a result, over the course of three years overall average attendance has risen from 70% to almost 90%, out-of-school suspensions have been reduced by two-thirds, and annual average teacher absence has declined from 8 days to three.

Anita Rassias
Chapter 188 Facilitator
Eastern Junior High School
19 Porter Street
Lynn, MA 01902
(617) 592-3444

Easthampton High School
Easthampton, MA

Easthampton High School offers a multi-dimensional approach to discipline and attendance problems. The entire ninth grade is clustered, with a staff team of five teachers assigned to it. Cluster activities include common planning time and increased staff development for the teacher team, and interdisciplinary curriculum, mediation, special projects, and counseling for students. The Community Health and Guidance Services (CHAGS) program arranges school-site assessments and counseling sessions with mental health, mediation, substance abuse prevention, family planning, and employment training services. A case management team meets regularly to link students with services. The team can also place students into a program providing students with flexible scheduling, a second program which offers individually tailored courses and computer-assisted instruction, and a competency-based occupational education program. These programs have resulted in a three year increase in attendance of 3%, a 30% decrease in out-of-school suspensions, a 25% decrease in in-school suspensions, and a 60% decrease in their dropout rate.

Jeffrey Sealander, Principal
Easthampton High School
70 Williston Avenue
Easthampton, MA 01027
(413) 527-3030

Chelsea Futures
Chelsea High School
Chelsea, MA

· Chelsea High School has restructured the entire school. The eighth and ninth grades have been clustered into two multi-grade clusters. Cluster teams receive substantial training, materials, and support focusing upon alternative instructional strategies, behavioral interventions, sensitivity to student learning styles, and team teaching. Life skills classes are taught during three activity periods, as well as interwoven into the curricula of major subject classes. The tenth through twelfth grades have been divided into two programs - the Renaissance Program which focuses upon the student as worker and teacher as coach, and the Traditional Program. School-wide support services include a positive life coaching program, a case management program which links students with social services, tutoring, and a mentor program. These restructuring changes have resulted in a decrease in suspensions and an increase in attendance, especially for the eighth and ninth graders.

Linda Alioto-Robinson, Coordinator
Chelsea Futures
Chelsea High School
12 Clark Avenue
Chelsea, MA 02150
(617) 884-9618

Graham and Parks Alternative Public School
Cambridge, MA

· The Graham and Parks Alternative School (K-8) in Cambridge, in response to discipline and attendance problems in the seventh and eighth grades, undertook an initiative to increase the sense of community and definition within the program. A seventh and eighth grade teacher team was created, and the team was given three periods a week of common planning time to coordinate the cluster and discuss new ways of teaching. A Community Meeting structure was established in which students and staff meet every two weeks to discuss and make decisions on all areas of schooling and social interactions. Beginning- and end-of-year outward bound experiences are conducted, a student mediation program was begun, an Apprenticeship Program places all eighth grade students in a ten-week community placement, and a Student Council was developed and given increased decision-making input. As well, the Haitian bilingual program has been increasingly integrated into all of these structures through translation at meetings and increased support. These changes have resulted in increased attendance, a reduction in student conflicts and a decrease in suspensions to one or two per year.

Len Solo, Principal
Graham and Parks Alternative Public School
15 Upton Street
Cambridge, MA 02139
(617) 349-6612

National Association of Mediation in Education Amherst, MA

· Greenfield Middle and High School, in partnership with the Franklin Mediation Service, have instituted school mediation programs and a truancy prevention mediation project. The truancy prevention project, started in September of 1990, works with students who are chronic truants referred by school administrators or through the courts. Intake meetings are conducted with school staff, parents, and the student and focus upon identifying conflicts and issues. Mediation between all parties requires a three-way mutual agreement to be reached between the school, parents, and the student. All agreements are provided with a month of follow-up services. Initial results indicate a 100% agreement rate. As well, the in-school mediation program provides an alternative route to traditional disciplinary practices for student conflicts. Students and staff are trained as mediators and work to resolve referred cases. Initial results indicate decreases in conflicts and a high rate of agreement.

Maggie Gretzinger
Mediation Coordinator
Greenfield High School
Lenox Avenue
Greenfield, MA 01301
(413) 773-3639

Cate Woolner
Franklin Mediation Service
10 Osgood Street
Greenfield, MA 01301
(413) 774-7469

National Association of Mediation in Education (NAME)
425 Amity Street
Amherst, MA 01002
Attn: Annette Townley
(413) 545-2462

Legal Requirements

This is a brief summary of the legal framework in Massachusetts for public school student discipline and attendance policies. For a more thorough description of pertinent requirements, please see "A Guide in Reviewing Student Handbooks," published by the Department of Education in March 1990.[79]

1. Each school committee must publish and provide to students its rules governing student conduct. The school committee must file a copy of the student handbook with the Department of Education. (Mass. Gen. Laws c.71, s.37H.)

2. The student handbook must include, at a minimum: descriptions of existing alternative education programs; due process guidelines; the actions that will lead to suspension or expulsion (and applicable procedures); procedures for discipline of students with special needs; standards and procedures to assure school building security and safety of students and school personnel; and the disciplinary measures to be taken in cases involving possession or use of illegal substances or weapons, use of force, vandalism, or violation of other students' civil rights. (Mass. Gen. Laws c.71, s.37H.)

3. Schools that include grades 9-12, inclusive, must establish a handbook review committee chaired by the principal and composed of students, parents, teachers and one person appointed by the school committee. The School Improvement Council may serve as the handbook review committee. The committee is responsible for reviewing the student handbook each spring, and recommending any proposed revisions to the school committee for approval. (Mass. Gen. Laws c.71, s.37H.) The handbook review committee can be an effective vehicle to build support and involvement in the school community for constructive discipline and attendance policies.

4. Before a student is temporarily suspended from public school for ten days or less, the student has the constitutional right to receive: (a) oral or written notice of the charges; (b) an explanation of the evidence; and (c) the opportunity to present his/her side of the story to an impartial decision-maker (who may be a school administrator). (Goss v/ Lopez, 419 U.S. 565 (1975).)

5. Courts are likely to view as equivalent to out-of-school suspension (a) in-school suspension that removes a student from the classes s/he ordinarily would attend for disciplinary reasons, and (b) "therapeutic dismissal" or other euphemisms for sending a student home from school for disciplinary reasons. In these cases schools should follow the procedures outlined in the Goss decision (see item #4), and the action should be recorded as a suspension.

6. Long-term suspension or expulsion of a student from public school requires more formal procedures than short-term suspension. State law requires a school committee to provide a fair hearing for a student and his/her parents before the student is permanently excluded for alleged misconduct. (Mass. Gen. Laws c.76, s.17.)

7. Corporal punishment in public schools is illegal in Massachusetts. School staff may not physically punish students, although they may use reasonable force if necessary to protect students, other persons or themselves from assault. (Mass. Gen. Laws c.71, s.37G.)

8. An effective code of student conduct will explain the attendance policy, including any distinction between excused and unexcused absences and whether students may complete and receive credit for work missed during an absence. If a school committee chooses to implement an academic punishment policy (which the Department of Education does not endorse), the policy must provide reasonable accommodation for students who are absent because of a disability (for example, a temporary illness or a chronic health problem). (Sec. 504 of the Rehab. Act of 1973.)

9. The student handbook must contain disciplinary procedures that will be followed for students with special needs, including the process used if a student with special needs is to be suspended for more than 10 days during a school year. (Honig v. Doe, 484 U.S. 305 (1988); Mass. Gen. Laws c.71B, s.3; Board of Education Policy on Disciplining Students with Special Needs.) School and evaluation teams should use the Individual Educational Plan process as a means of anticipating and preventing discipline problems, based on the student's particular needs and individualized program.

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